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JAMES ENSOR

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FOR THE BENEFIT OF

"BELGIANS IN BRITAIN"

BUCHHOLZ GALLERY

CURT VALENTIN

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JAMES ENSOR

by LÉO VAN PUYVELDE*

Ensor's father was an Englishman who had married a Fleming, and settled in Ostend, where Ensor was born in 1860.** During his youth, the painter spent three years at the Brussels Academy. When he left in 1880, he joined all the most advanced movements in art. In *L'Ardente Peinture d'Ensor,* which was published in Paris in 1939, I described this period of feverish activity. The reader will perhaps allow me to quote the following passage: 'Tremendous battles were waged against everything conservative. There was a lively interchange of blows. Clubs and coteries were born and died. The most active and the best amongst them was the "Twentieth Century" group which was founded in 1889. Its membership was constantly changing, but the leading spirit, Octave Mans, managed to keep up enthusiasm for things new. Ten years later, the same struggle was carried on by *La Libre Esthétique.* Ensor was in the thick of the fight. He produced works which surprised by their boldness. He experimented even more daringly than his fellow artists. He held forth on the subject of art, wrote manifestos, and poked fun at

*Abridged from the article *A Tribute to the Painter James Ensor* in *Message: Belgian Review.* London. No. 15, January 1943, p. 45-47.

**The news of Ensor's death, which was received last year, was denied by the Belgian Information Center.

the critics of modern art. He had many set-backs. Already in 1880, "Le Chou" which now occupies a place of honour at the Musées Royaux at Brussels, had been called "a disgusting piece of work." "L'Après-midi à Ostende", which is now at the Royal Museum at Brussels was, in 1881, refused by the Brussels Salon. In 1883, the selection committee turned down "La Mangeuse d'Huîtres" and in 1884 refused all the works he submitted. Later, when he was an enthusiastic supporter of the "Twentieth Century", he had to pay dearly for his revolutionary boldness. Neither the man nor his work was taken seriously. Even his fellow artists of the "Twentieth Century" refused to exhibit any of his works in 1888, including "Les Enfants à la Toilette" and the first "Tentation de Saint Antoine". They did so again in 1890, when he submitted a group of works including "Les Masques devant la Mort" and "L'Etonnement du Masque". When, in 1904, *La Libre Esthétique* exhibited a collection of works by the Neo-Impressionist Théo van Rysselberghe, it refused to show Ensor's works with them.

It is understandable that in view of such a reception the artist should have retired at an early date, into ever increasing solitude. He withdrew to his native Ostend, where his mother looked after him until he was sixty; afterwards, a devoted aunt continued to give him that affectionate care which the disappointed artist needed.

We went to visit him at Ostend, at 27 rue de Flandre, an ordinary middle-class dwelling, on the ground floor of which his devoted helpers still carried on the souvenir shop he had inherited from his parents. He had a

huge room upstairs which he used both as a sitting-room and a studio. It was crowded with pictures and drawings, which he would not sell, with *bibelots,* dolls, vases, faded fabrics, and artificial flowers, which had accumulated during the course of his lifetime, and all of which formed a very picturesque and 'Victorian' setting, recalling the different phases of his artistic career. It provided an endless subject of conversation when he had visitors, enabled him to express his ideas on art, and served as an introduction to the works in the next room which he wished to sell.

Long and patient observation was needed before one discovered what Ensor was really like. The old man with white hair, curly beard and unwrinkled face had a childlike soul and was naively and sincerely devoted to the cult of beauty. He achieved complete self-expression only in his art—but there he was entirely successful.

Beauty—that was Ensor's gospel. An artist needs no broader gospel.

Beauty in the moral sphere—like another Don Quixote, in his paintings still more so than in his speech, he tilted against impostors, dishonest critics, 'evil', and vivisectionists. It was said that he had a bee in his bonnet about these. It was the naive indignation of a childlike soul.

He it was who inaugurated Belgian 'luminism', and that is his main title to fame. As early as 1880 he put an end to realism and to its substitute neo-impressionism. Ensor was not simply a follower of the French impressionists; such artists are found in Belgium—as elsewhere, for example, Emile Claus and Théo van

Rysselberghe, among others. Luminism as Ensor began it sixty years ago in Belgium was quite distinct from the impressionism of Monet, Renoir and Sisley, although it had connections with impressionism. Like Van Gogh, who was also obsessed with light, Ensor created his own style. It not only entailed a general brightening of the palette, and the use of light values as being more important than forms and colours. It was also the affirmation in painting of the supremacy of mind over matter; of the dream over reality, of *joie de vivre* over arduous toil. It expressed the triumph of a discreet style over sumptuous and sensuous painting.

Part of Ensor's work is 'absolute' painting—nothing but sheer beauty of colour, just as there is absolute music which is sheer beauty of rhythmic sound. The subject, the 'story' of the picture, is of no importance. The artist somehow puts on to convas the mystery of his own emotions and thus conveys them to us. A magic world springs into life before our eyes.

It has taken Belgians some time to understand this part of Ensor's work. Many Belgian connoisseurs still prefer the early works which display craftsmanship and a pictorial sense in keeping with ancient Flemish tradition. Ensor's masterpieces are luminous paintings, where light is supreme, and from which all remnant of reality has been eliminated. Whether he paints town or country scenes, still lifes, fish or shells, or again *Masquerades* where the real is conveyed by the unreal, he never paints anything else but light. He seeks to render the throbbing of light as rare colours, and unusual forms, and the pure harmonies thus created. In

the work of the painter of the "Jardin d'Amour" light became the source of all freshness and spontaneity. The roofs of Ostend inspired him to compose a symphony of light which is a hymn of joy.

Besides this technical element, there is another fundamental element in Ensor's work—his humour. He has in a way the humour of Shakespeare, Beardsley, Hogarth, and *Punch*. He owes it, of course, to his English ancestry. But it has become mixed with Flemish wit. At Ostend, the great man lives in contact with the Flemings of the coast: they have a biting wit, they are rough and outspoken, but they lead a generous, untrammelled existence: they are broad-minded, courageous in the face of toil and death, and are afraid only of not being human enough. It is this biting wit which makes Ensor so much a Belgian, although Englishmen must feel how his humour is akin to theirs.

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Catalogue

1 Seascape. 1880
Oil. 11 x 16 inches
Lent by Harry C. Sandhouse

2 Tribulations of St. Anthony. 1887
Oil. 46⅜ x 66 inches
Lent by The Museum of Modern Art

3 Still Life. 1889
Oil. 23 x 29 inches
Lent by Baroness Lambert

4 Intrigue (Masks). 1890
Oil. 35½ x 59 inches
Lent by the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp
Through the courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art

5 The Red Label. 1893
Oil. 40 x 32 inches
Lent by Bernhard Mayer

6 Masks and Chinese Vases. 1898
Oil. 40 x 32 inches
Lent by Bernhard Mayer

7 Le Grand Juge. 1898
Oil. 29½ x 23½ inches
Lent by Richard Katz

8 Jardin d'Amour. 1900
Oil. 14½ x 18 inches
Lent by Harry C. Sandhouse

9 Marriage of Masks. 1910
Oil. 61 x 50 inches
Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Harry Bakwin

10 Rencontre. 1910
Oil. 21 x 25½ inches
Lent by Harry C. Sandhouse

11 Still Life. c. 1910
Oil. 21¼ x 25¾ inches

12 Vase and Sea Shells
Oil. 21 x 29 inches

13 Still Life and Masks. 1920
Oil. 25 x 20 inches
Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Harry Bakwin

14 Dunes. 1920
Oil. 21¼ x 25¾ inches
Lent by Dr. Max Hirschler

15 Still Life with Chinese Vase. 1921
Oil. 21¼ x 26¾ inches
Lent by Dr. Max Hirschler

16 The Fairy Ballet. c. 1925
Oil. 20 x 24 inches
Lent by the Detroit Institute of Arts

17 Portrait of Sam Salz. 1930
Gouache. 10 x 7½ inches
Lent by Sam Salz

18 Self Portrait. 1934
Oil. 13 x 10 inches
Lent by Sam Salz

19 Poster for "La Plume". 1898
Color Lithograph

20-35 Etchings and Lithographs

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